

Blighted Property Review Committee

Tuesday, April 1, 2008

Minutes

Members Attending: L. Olsen, W. Bealer, M. Wolfe, M. Candelario

Staff Attending: J. Khokhar, M. Mayfield, A. Miller, L. Kelleher

Others Attending: None

Mr. Olsen called the meeting to order at 6:20 p.m.

Public Comment

There were no requests for public comment from those present.

Approval of the Agenda and the February Meeting Minutes

Mr. Olsen asked the Committee to consider the agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the March meeting.

Ms. Wolfe moved, seconded by Mr. Candelario, to approve the agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the March meeting as presented. The motion was approved unanimously.

Blighted Property Forum

Ms. Kelleher stated that to date she has had response from the Bethlehem, Allentown and Harrisburg Blighted Property Review Committees. She reported that Harrisburg and Allentown have had committees in operation for approximately 20 years and they each designate 20-30 blighted properties per year. Both cities were excited about the potential to share ideas and discuss this issue. Allentown shared their timetable and letters sent to the owners of the designated blighted properties.

Ms. Kelleher reported that the Blighted Property Review Committees select blighted properties in the fall. Letters advising property owners that their properties are on the list for taking are mailed in January. This process stimulates owners to rehabilitate properties and both cities report that demolition is not the usual result. Property owners are forced to submit rehab plans and city staff monitors progress.

Ms. Kelleher stated that staff from Bethlehem was not as enthusiastic about the forum. Bethlehem has had their committee working since the early 1970's and they deal with approximately 2-3 blighted properties per year. She gave a brief description of the housing program used by the Harrisburg Community Development Department in the mid 1990's, similar to the Our City Reading program, which helped to spur the re-

invigoration of the housing stock.

Ms. Kelleher said that both Allentown and Harrisburg were open to visiting another city or being host for the forum. Ms. Kelleher stated that she discussed this information with Mr. Johnson on Monday and he would prefer scheduling the meeting for the 3rd week of May.

The Committee discussed the forum opportunities. Mr. Bealer noted the similarities of Reading and Allentown in housing style (high residential density in the downtown and single family homes in the outer rim) and financial woes.

The Committee asked Ms. Kelleher to arrange a meeting in Harrisburg first with an invitation to Allentown on either Tuesday, May 20th or Wednesday, May 21st and to schedule a meeting in Allentown with an invitation to Harrisburg in late June.

GIS Mapping

Mr. Khokhar provided an update on the completion of the GIS Map that will provide the Committee and City with the properties identified city-wide as blighted and abandoned along with properties taken by the County ADD program and the other vacant lots. Access will be provided to Mr. Olsen and Mr. Bealer - both have submitted Computer Use forms to the IT Department. Training will be provided by Mr. Chapman in the IT Department.

The Committee briefly discussed the need for the demolition of the extremely blighted properties in the 500 block of Buttonwood Street. Ms. Kelleher reported that one property owner is refusing to sell and move. It was noted that these properties have been in a state of blight for over 20 years.

Blighted Property Revitalization & Reclamation Acts – Federal & State

The Committee reviewed the Federal Act attached to the agenda. Ms. Kelleher was asked to draft a letter to Senator Rhodes, Casey and Specter asking them to redefine the availability of grants and to redefine Section 3 b 1 which seems to limit these funds to cities that experience a decrease in population. Ms. Mayfield was asked to review the Federal Act to determine the City's ability to modify the Act for local use. She was also asked to report on the potential impact this act could have locally.

The State Act was found to be limited to grant money covering the hiring and training of Codes personnel to address blight.

Blighted Property Plan and Timetable

The Committee again reviewed the timetable, letter of taking, etc. supplied by Allentown. It was decided that these documents could be used as a starting point. Mr. Bealer suggested that along with the rehab plan, the owner of the blighted property be required to submit a cost breakdown of the rehab project along with an environmental

sheet addressing the need to correct/remove asbestos, lead paint, etc.

Ms. Wolfe expressed concern that a fast approach may cause homeowners to abandon their properties. In response there was a discussion on the availability of rehabilitation assistance programs. Ms. Kelleher highlighted the handout distributed by the Mr. Cockrell in a meeting about blighted properties in the 6th Ward, the programs offered by Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) and the low-interest programs offered by local banks. Ms. Wolfe describes the programs offered through local churches. Ms. Kelleher stated that the summer intern in the Council Office could build a list of available programs to assist property owners. This list could be mailed out with the correspondence coming from the Committee. Mr. Miller noted that the majority of the blighted properties have already been abandoned by their owners.

Ms. Wolfe inquired about which city office handles housing. Ms. Mayfield replied that housing is overseen by both the Codes Office and Community Development Department.

Mr. Candelario noted the existence of grants by tycoon-philanthropists such as Bill Gates to assist with home improvements in some areas.

Ms. Wolfe suggested that the Committee start its work on blighted areas that adjoin neighborhoods in reasonably good condition with strong community groups. Mr. Bealer stated that the project could be the impetus behind starting a strong community group.

Mr. Olsen inquired how the Committee would fund its efforts. Mr. Khokhar reported that as the City is close to its overall debt limit, the City will not be able to float a \$5 million dollar bond to finance the efforts of the Committee. Ms. Kelleher stated that Ms. DeGroote in the Finance Department could be asked to perform some research to identify the availability of grant programs to address blight. Mr. Khokhar noted the willingness of the Home Builders Association to assist the City's efforts. It was noted that the visit with Allentown could help the Committee understand the true cost of operating a Blighted Property program.

Mr. Olsen asked Ms. Mayfield to compose a list of "do's and don'ts" outlining the Committee's responsibilities and duties. He suggested that the Committee meet in a retreat without staff to consider the various documents and information compiled. The Committee can then outline a plan of action. He suggested that Mr. Khokhar meet with Mr. Mukerji to learn about the available funding from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and the state Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).

The Committee inquired when Mr. Fuhs would begin attending the meetings again. Ms. Kelleher explained that some family issues along with the rigors of the current election campaign have interrupted his ability to attend meetings. She offered to speak with him about attendance at meetings.

Mr. Olsen stated that some business issues have required Mr. Johnson's attention

causing him to miss meetings. He asked Ms. Mayfield if the parties (Council, Redevelopment Authority and Planning Commission) designating representatives could select alternates. Ms. Mayfield stated that the language in the enabling ordinance allows the representative agencies to designate alternates.

No further business was brought forward. Mr. Candelario moved, seconded by Mr. Bealer, to adjourn the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher, City Clerk

Recap of follow-up issues

- Arrange meetings with Allentown and Harrisburg Blighted Property Review Committees - *Ms. Kelleher*
- Set up GIS training for Mr. Olsen and Mr. Bealer - *Mr. Khokhar*
- Review Federal Blighted Property Revitalization and Reclamation Act to determine if a similar ordinance can be enacted on the local level – *Ms. Mayfield*
- Draft letter to Federal Senators to request an amendment of the Act that will redefine the availability of grants to cities that have experienced a population reduction – *Ms. Kelleher*
- Draft list of programs to assist homeowners with rehabilitation - *Ms. Kelleher & Council Intern*
- Work with Ms. DeGroote to draft a list of available grant programs to assist the Committee with either the rehab or demolition of blighted properties - *Mr. Khokhar*
- Work with Home Builders Association to seek rehabilitation assistance - *Mr. Khokhar*
- Compose a list of "do's and don'ts" that outlines the Committee's responsibilities and abilities - *Ms. Mayfield*
- Retreat to define plan of action - *members of the Committee*